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RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH PRIORITY 5219

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 001182

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

EAP/MLS, S/P (GREEN), D (LEE)

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM VM

SUBJECT: OLYMPIC-SIZE YAWN MASKS REAL ANXIETIES

REF: A. STATE 105512

1B. HANOI 1094

1C. HANOI 633

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Classified By: Political Counselor Brian Aggeler.

Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Olympic fever in Vietnam was decidedly low-grade, with local media providing simple, straightforward coverage focused almost entirely on sports. There was little commentary on the Games in the official press, and most urban residents seemed to greet the events with a shrug. Sports fans preferred to talk Euro Cup. Still, for all the studied nonchalance, the Beijing Olympics seemed to elicit real anxiety. April's torch rally in Ho Chi Minh City was a near fiasco, while the Olympics' opening ceremony reinforced an image of Vietnam's historical brother-enemy as big, powerful, modern, and rich. Polling data indicate that a majority in Vietnam think that the Games raised China's standing in the world: for many in Vietnam, this is not a comforting thought. END COMMENT.

12. (U) Per ref A, we asked several of our contacts to characterize Vietnam's perceptions of the Beijing Olympics. This cable should be read together with ref B, which provides an overview of Vietnam-China Relations.

A WONDERFUL, HORRIBLE OPENING CEREMONY

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13. (SBU) Coverage of the 2008 Olympics in Vietnam's state-controlled media was uncomplicated, with a focus on the Games as a sporting event. Interest in the athletic competitions was not particularly intense, reflecting the fact that Vietnam did not send many athletes to the Games, and they did not do particularly well. Only one of Vietnam's 13 athletes medaled (a silver in the 56 kg men's weightlifting), and with the exception of a Tae Quan Do semifinalist, none of the rest made it out of the preliminary rounds. For the majority of Vietnam's soccer-crazed sports fans, June's UEFA European Football Championship generated much more attention and enthusiasm.

14. (C) There was almost no official media coverage of the social or political context surrounding the Games, let alone human rights or Tibet. Still, Vietnam's more tech-savvy observers were aware of the controversies, as the chairman of one of Vietnam's major interned media companies Nguyen Anh Tuan (protect) explained, and China did not necessarily come across well. In general, however,

interest was fairly low, and Vietnam's bloggers quickly moved on to other stories, such as China's reported "invasion plans" posted on Sina.com and melamine contamination, Tuan said. Even those with a professional interest in following the Olympics, such as Nguyen Thanh Hani of the MFA's China Desk, sought to portray the Beijing Games as an international, rather than a Chinese, occasion.

¶ 15. (C) On the other hand, several of our contacts pointed to the Games' spectacular opening and closing ceremonies as the real attention-grabbers. VietnamNet's Tuan described the opening ceremony in tones evocative of Leni Riefenshtahl's Berlin Games: emotionally arresting to be sure, but designed to intimidate the world by showcasing China's size and strength. Others, drawing a similar (if less dramatically expressed) conclusion, pointed to the waves upon waves of Chinese dancers and participants, dutifully moving on cue, as something that Vietnam could never pull off. Maybe Hanoi could get Zhang Yimou to direct Hanoi's 1,000-year birthday celebrations next year, quipped the Director of China Studies at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Do Tien Sam.

"BIG COUNTRY, LITTLE PEOPLE"

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¶ 16. (C) Lest one mistake his meaning, Dr. Sam followed his somewhat wistful comment with a sober, familiar recitation of Vietnam's historical grievances: China's 1,000-year occupation; invasions over the following centuries; China's brief, but bloody incursion into Vietnam in 1979 -- as well as Vietnam's current fears of economic dependency. "Big country, little people," Dr. Sam concluded, quoting an earthy Vietnamese proverb to describe what many feel is China's narrow-minded and chauvinistic obsession with

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national power.

¶ 17. (C) This sort of sentiment was evident in the run-up to the Olympics, even if the Games themselves came and went without much overt attention. In April, Vietnam's dissident blog scene bristled with fervid warnings that China intended to march the Olympic torch through the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands, a prospect the PRC Embassy's Lu Lei laughed off as nonsensical. In the event (ref. C), the torch rally in Ho Chi Minh City nearly ended before it began, with Vietnam's DPM Nguyen Thien Nhan stomping away rather than accept the torch from the Chinese Ambassador (who himself had intruded into the ceremony) and a high-ranking HCMC official extinguishing the Olympic flame rather than parade it past a throng of flag-waving China supporters, likely organized by the Chinese Consulate despite instructions from the Vietnamese hosts that there be no demonstrations.

COMMENT

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¶ 18. (C) Vietnam's attitudes toward its brother-enemy are most frequently described here as "phuc tap" -- "complicated" in Vietnamese, but with connotations similar to its English homonym. With over 2,000 years of close contact, genuine admiration for China's civilization and accomplishments mixes with deeply rooted paranoia. The Olympics were no different. In the end, none of our contacts thought the Olympics changed anyone's mind about China; most said the Games simply reinforced preexisting notions. 62 percent of Vietnamese respondents in a recent INR-supported survey said they believed that the Olympics raised China's standing in the world. What the survey didn't report is that for many Vietnamese, this is not necessarily reassuring.

PALMER